

TOLSTOY, A CONFESSION

CHAPTER 5

p. 34. Several times I said to myself, 'But perhaps I have overlooked something, or failed to understand something? It cannot be that this state of despair is common to all men.' And I searched for an answer to my questions in all branches of knowledge acquired by man. I sought long and laboriously. I did not search half-heartedly, or out of idle curiosity, but tormentedly, persistently, day and night, like a dying man seeking salvation, and I found nothing.

I searched all branches of knowledge and not only found nothing, but was convinced that all those who had searched the realms of knowledge like myself had likewise found nothing. Not only had they found nothing, but they had plainly acknowledged the same thing that had led me to despair: the meaninglessness of life as the only indisputable piece of knowledge available to man.

I searched everywhere and thanks to a life spent in study, and to my connections with the world of learning, I had access to scholars of various disciplines. I was not denied insight into their erudition, both through books and in conversation with them, and I learnt everything that knowledge has to answer to the question of life.

For a long time I could not believe that knowledge has no answer to the question of life, other than that which it gives. For a long time it seemed to me, as I observed the air of importance and seriousness with which science asserts its propositions (which have nothing to do with human life), that I had failed to understand something. For a long time I cowered before knowledge, and felt that the fact of my receiving no adequate answers to my question was a result of my naiveté and no fault of knowledge. But it was no laughing matter to me, it was no joke but a subject that dominated my life. I was finally forced to conclude that my questions were the only legitimate ones serving as the basis of all branches of knowledge, and that the fault did not lie with me and my questions, but with science if it had the pretension to answer these questions.

My question, the one that brought me to the point of suicide when I was fifty years old, was a most simple one that lies in the soul of every person, from a silly child to a wise old man. It is the question without which life is impossible, as I had learnt from experience. It is this: what

will come of what I do today or tomorrow? What will come of my entire life?

Expressed another way the question can be put like this: why do I live? Why do I wish for anything, or do anything? Or expressed another way: is there any meaning in my life that will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death which awaits me?

I searched through human knowledge for an answer to this question, which is the same whatever way it is expressed. I found that according to their relation to the question, all branches of human knowledge are divided, almost into two opposite hemispheres, at the opposite ends of which are two poles: one positive and one negative: yet at neither pole were there any answers to the question of life.

One branch of knowledge does not even seem to acknowledge the question and yet gives clear and precise answers to its own independently posed question: this is the realm of experimental knowledge, and at its extreme end stands mathematics. The other realm of knowledge recognizes the question but does not answer it. This is the sphere of speculative philosophy, at the extreme end of which stands metaphysics.

From my early youth I had studied speculative philosophy, but was later attracted by both mathematical and natural science. Until I had posed my question clearly to myself and the question itself had grown up within me, demanding an urgent resolution, I was satisfied with the falsified answers given by knowledge.

FROM: LEO TOLSTOY,
A CONFESSION AND OTHER RELIGIOUS
WRITINGS, trans. Jane Kentish
(Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987)

CHAPTER 8

f 49 None of these doubts, which I can now express more or less coherently, could I have formulated at the time. At the time I simply felt that despite the fact that my deductions about the vanity of life were logically unavoidable and were confirmed by the greatest thinkers, there was still something wrong with them. Whether it was in my reasoning, or whether it was in my formulation of the question, I did not know. I simply felt that the reasoning behind my conviction was complete, but that it was not enough. All these conclusions failed to persuade me to follow my argument to its end, that is to kill myself. I would not be speaking the truth if I said that it was through my reason that I arrived where I did and yet did not kill myself. My reason was working, but so too was something else that I can only call a consciousness of life. There was also another force at work which made me pay attention to the latter and not to the former. It was this force that led me out of my state of despair and guided my reason in an entirely different direction. It compelled me to pay attention to the fact that I, and the hundreds of others similar to myself, do not comprise the whole of humanity, and that I still did not know what this life of humanity was.

As I looked around at the narrow circle of my colleagues I saw nothing but people who had failed to understand the question, or who had understood it but drowned it in the intoxication of life, or who had understood it and had put an end to their lives, or who understood it but through weakness continued living in despair. And I saw no others. I thought that this narrow circle of scholars, and of rich and distinguished people, to which I belonged made up the whole of mankind and that the millions who had lived and still live were THEM, some sort of cattle, people.

It seems so strange to me now, so utterly incomprehensible, that in my reasoning of life I could have overlooked the life of humanity that surrounded me on all sides and that I could have been so ridiculously mistaken as to think that my life, and the life of Solomon and Schopenhauer, was the true, normal life, while the lives of millions was not worthy of attention. However strange it may seem now, I know it was so at the time. Amidst the wanderings of my conceited mind I felt certain that Solomon, Schopenhauer and myself had posed the question so honestly and exactly that there could be no two ways about it. I felt so certain that

all these millions simply belonged to the category of those who had not yet penetrated the depths of the question, that as I searched for the meaning of my life it never once occurred to me to think: 'What sort of meaning do all the millions who have lived, and do live in the world give to their lives?'

I lived in this state of madness for a long time. It is a state which if not in deed then in words is very characteristic of more liberated and learned people. But whether it was thanks to my somewhat strange and instinctive love of the true working people that I was forced to understand them and to realize that they are not as stupid as we thought; or whether it was thanks to the sincerity of my conviction that I knew of nothing better to do than hang myself, I sensed anyway that if I wanted to live and to understand the meaning of life I must not seek it among those who have lost it and wish to kill themselves, but among the millions of people living and dead who have created life, and who carry the weight of our lives together with their own. And I looked around at the enormous masses of simple, uneducated people without wealth, who have lived and who still live, and I saw something quite different. I saw that with a few exceptions all those millions do not fit into my divisions, and that I could not categorize them as people who did not understand the question because they themselves posed, and answered, the question with unusual clarity. Neither could I categorize them as epicureans, since their lives rest more on deprivation and suffering than on pleasure. I could still less regard them as living out their meaningless lives irrationally, since they could explain every act of their lives, including death. They considered suicide the greatest evil. It appeared that mankind as a whole had some kind of comprehension of the meaning of life that I did not acknowledge and derided. It followed that rational knowledge does not provide the meaning of life, but excludes it; while the meaning given to life by the millions of people, by humanity as a whole, is founded on some sort of knowledge that is despised and considered false.

Rational knowledge, as presented by the learned and wise, negates the meaning of life, yet the vast masses — humanity as a whole — recognize that this meaning lies in irrational knowledge. And this irrational knowledge is faith, the very thing that I could not help rejecting. This God, one in three, the creation in six days, the devils and angels and all the rest that I could not accept without going mad.

My position was terrible. I knew that I could find nothing along the path of rational knowledge, other than negation of life. While in faith I found nothing other than a negation of reason, which was even more impossible than denial of life. According to rational knowledge life is an

evil and people know it. They have the choice of ending their lives and yet they have always carried on living, just as I myself have done, despite having known for a long time that life is meaningless and evil. According to faith it follows that in order to comprehend the meaning of life I must renounce my reason, the very thing for which meaning was necessary.

CHAPTER 9

p. 52
A contradiction arose from which there were only two ways out: either that which I called reasonable was not as reasonable as I thought, or that which I felt to be irrational was not as irrational as I thought. And I started to check the line of argument that stemmed from my rational knowledge.

As I checked this line of argument I found it to be entirely correct. The conclusion that life is nothing was inevitable, but I spotted a mistake. The mistake was that my thinking did not correspond to the question I had posed. The question was: why do I live? Or: is there anything that will remain and not be annihilated of my illusory and transitory life? Or: what meaning has my finite existence in an infinite universe? In order to answer this question I studied life.

Clearly the solution to all the possible questions of life could not satisfy me because my question, however simple it may seem at first, involves a demand for an explanation of the finite by means of the infinite and vice versa.

I had asked: what meaning has life beyond time, beyond space and beyond cause? And I was answering the question: 'What is the meaning of my life within time, space and cause?' The result was that after long and laboured thought I could only answer: none.

In my deliberations I was continually drawing comparisons between the finite and the finite, and the infinite and the infinite, and I could not have done otherwise. Thus I reached the only conclusion I could reach: force is force, matter is matter, will is will, the infinite is the infinite, nothing is nothing; and I could go no further than that.

It was somewhat similar to what happens in mathematics when, trying to resolve an equation, we get an identity. The method of deduction is correct, but the only answer obtained is that a equals a , and x equals x , or o equals o . Precisely the same thing was happening with my reasoning concerning the meaning of life. The only answers the sciences give to this question are identities.

And really, strictly rational knowledge, such as that of Descartes,¹³ begins with complete doubt in everything and throws aside any knowledge founded on faith, reconstructing everything along laws of reason and experiment. And it can provide no answer other than the one I reached:

an indefinite one. It was only at first that I thought knowledge had given an affirmative answer, Schopenhauer's answer that life has no meaning and is evil. But when I went into the matter I realized that this answer is not affirmative and that it was only my senses that had taken it to be so. Strictly expressed, as it is by the Brahmins, Solomon, and Schopenhauer, the answer is but a vague one, an identity: o equals o , life presented to me as nothing is nothing. Thus, philosophical knowledge denies nothing but simply replies that it cannot solve the question, and that as far as it is concerned any resolution remains indefinite.

Having understood this, I realized that it was impossible to search for an answer to my questions in rational knowledge; that the answer given by rational knowledge simply suggests that the answer can only be obtained by stating the question in another way, by introducing the question of the relation of the finite to the infinite. I realized that no matter how irrational and distorted the answers given by faith might be, they had the advantage of introducing to every answer a relationship between the finite and the infinite, without which there can be no solution. Whichever way I put the question: how am I to live? the answer is always: according to God's law. Or to the question: is there anything real that will come of my life? the answer is: eternal torment or eternal bliss. Or, to the question: what meaning is there that is not destroyed by death? the answer is: unity with the infinite, God, heaven.

Thus in addition to rational knowledge, which I had hitherto thought to be the only knowledge, I was inevitably led to acknowledge that there does exist another kind of knowledge – an irrational one – possessed by humanity as a whole: faith, which affords the possibility of living. Faith remained as irrational to me as before, but I could not fail to recognize that it alone provides mankind with the answers to the question of life, and consequently with the possibility of life.

Rational knowledge had led me to recognize that life is meaningless. My life came to a halt and I wanted to kill myself. As I looked around at people, at humanity as a whole, I saw that they lived and affirmed that they knew the meaning of life. I looked at myself. I had lived as long as I knew the meaning of life. For me, as for others, faith provided the meaning of life and the possibility of living.

Having looked around further at people in other countries and at my contemporaries and predecessors, I saw the same thing. Where there is life there is faith. Since the day of creation faith has made it possible for mankind to live, and the essential aspects of that faith are always and everywhere the same.

Whatever answers faith gives, regardless of which faith, or to whom the answers are given, such answers always give an infinite meaning to the finite existence of man; a meaning that is not destroyed by suffering, deprivation or death. This means that only in faith can we find the meaning and possibility of life. I realized that the essential meaning of faith lies not only in the 'manifestations of things unseen', and so on, or in revelation (this is only a description of one of the signs of faith); nor is it simply the relationship between man and God (it is necessary to define faith, then God, and not God through faith); nor is it an agreement with what one has been told, although this is what faith is commonly understood to be. Faith is a knowledge of the meaning of human life, the consequence of which is that man does not kill himself but lives. Faith is the force of life. If a man lives, then he must believe in something. If he did not believe that there was something he must live for he would not live. If he does not see and comprehend the illusion of the finite he will believe in the finite. If he does understand the illusion of the finite, he is bound to believe in the infinite. Without faith it is impossible to live.

I recalled the whole course of my inner thinking and was horrified. It was now clear to me that in order for man to live he must either be unaware of the infinite, or he must have some explanation of the meaning of life by which the finite can be equated with the infinite. I had this explanation but it was no use to me while I believed in the finite; and I began to test it against my reason. And in the light of reason my former explanation vanished into thin air. But the time came when I no longer believed in the finite. And then I began, on a rational basis, to construct out of what I knew an explanation which might give a meaning to life; but nothing came of it. Together with the finest human intellects I reached the conclusion that 0 equals 0 and was most astonished at reaching this conclusion and that there could be no other.

And I began to grow close to the believers among the poor, simple, uneducated folk: pilgrims, monks, sectarians and peasants. The belief held by these people was the same Christianity as that of the pseudo-believers of my circle. They too had mixed a great deal of superstition alongside Christian truths, but the difference was that while superstition was quite unnecessary to the believers of my circle, had nothing to do with their lives and simply provided some kind of epicurean distraction, the superstitions of the believer belonging to the labouring section of the population were so interconnected with their lives that they could not have conceived of life without them; they were a necessary condition of their lives. The whole way of life of the believers of my own circle stood in contradiction to their faith, whereas the whole way of life of the believers from the working population reaffirmed the meaning their faith gave to life. And I started to look more closely at the life and faith of these people, and the further I looked the more convinced I became that theirs was the true faith, that their faith was essential to them, and that it alone provides a sense of the meaning and possibility of life. In contrast to what I saw among the people of my class where it is possible to live without faith and where among the thousands there is barely one who can admit to being a

believer, among them there is hardly one in a thousand who does not believe. In contrast to what I saw happening in my own circle, where the whole of life is spent in idleness, amusement and dissatisfaction with life, I saw that these people who laboured hard throughout their entire lives were less dissatisfied with life than the rich. In contrast to the people of our class who resist and curse the privations and sufferings of their lot, these people accept sickness and grief without question or protest, and with a calm and firm conviction that this is how it must be, that it cannot be otherwise and that it is all for the good. Contrary to us, who the more intelligent we are the less we understand the meaning of life and see some kind of malicious joke in the fact that we suffer and die, these people live, suffer and approach death peacefully and, more often than not, joyfully. In contrast to the fact that a peaceful death, a death without horror and despair, is a most rare exception in our circle, a tormented, rebellious and unhappy death is a most rare exception amongst these people. And there are millions and millions of these people who are deprived of all those things, which for the Solomons and I are the only blessings in life, and who nevertheless find tremendous happiness in life. I looked more widely around me. I looked at the lives of the multitudes who have lived in the past and who live today. And of those who understood the meaning of life I saw not two, or three, or ten, but hundreds, thousands and millions. And all of them, endlessly varied in their customs, minds, educations and positions, and in complete contrast to my ignorance, knew the meaning of life and death, endured suffering and hardship, lived and died and saw this not as vanity but good.

And I came to love these people. The further I penetrated into the lives of those living and dead about whom I had read and heard, the more I loved them and the easier it became for me to live. I lived like this for about two years and a great change took place within me, for which I had been preparing for a long time and the roots of which had always been in me. What happened was that the life of our class, the rich and learned, became not only distasteful to me, but lost all meaning. All our activities, our discussions, our science and our art struck me as sheer indulgence. I realized that there was no meaning to be found here. It was the activities of the labouring people, those who produce life, that presented itself to me as the only true way. I realized that the meaning provided by this life was truth and I accepted it.

CHAPTER II

p.60
I remembered how these very beliefs repelled me and seemed devoid of any meaning when they were professed by people who lived in contradiction to them, and I remembered how these same beliefs attracted me and seemed sensible when I saw people living in accord with them; and I realized why I had rejected them and found them meaningless and why I now accepted them and found them full of meaning. I realized that I had been lost, and how I had become lost. I had strayed not so much because my ideas had been incorrect as because I had lived foolishly. I realized that I had been blinded from the truth not so much through my mistaken thoughts as through my life itself, which had been spent in satisfying desire and in exclusive conditions of epicureanism. I realized that my question as to what my life is, and the answer that it is an evil, was quite correct. The only mistake was that I had extended an answer that related only to myself to life as a whole. I had asked myself what my life was and had received the answer that it is evil and meaningless. And this was quite true, for my life of indulgent pursuits was meaningless and evil, but that answer applied only to my life and not to human life in general. I understood a truism that I subsequently found in the gospels: that people often preferred darkness to light because their deeds were evil. For he who acts maliciously hates light and avoids it so as not to throw light on his deeds. I understood that in order to understand life it is first of all necessary that life is not evil and meaningless, and then one may use reason in order to elucidate it. I realized why I had for so long been treading so close to such an obvious truth without seeing it, and that in order to think and speak about human life one must think and speak about human life and not about the lives of a few parasites. The truth has always been the truth, just as $2 \times 2 = 4$, but I had not admitted it, because in acknowledging that $2 \times 2 = 4$ I would have had to admit that I was a bad man. And it was more important and necessary for me to feel that I was good than to admit that $2 \times 2 = 4$. I came to love good people and to loathe myself, and I acknowledged the truth. And then it all became clear to me.

Imagine an executioner who has spent all his life torturing people and chopping off heads, or a hopeless drunkard, or a madman who has spent his entire life in a dark room which he detests but imagines that he would die if he left it — imagine if they should ask themselves, 'What is life?'

Obviously the only answer they could come up with is that life is the greatest of evils. The madman's answer would be absolutely correct, but only with respect to himself. Suppose I am such a madman? Suppose all of us who are wealthy and learned are such madmen?

And I realized that we really are such madmen. I, at any rate, was one. Indeed, a bird is made in such a way that it can fly, gather food and build a nest, and when I see a bird doing these things I rejoice. Goats, hares and wolves are made in order to eat, multiply and feed their families, and when they do this I feel quite sure that they are happy and that their lives are meaningful. What should a man do? He too must work for his existence, just as the animals do, but with the difference that he will perish if he does it alone, for he must work for an existence, not just for himself, but for everyone. And when he does this I feel quite sure that he is happy and that his life has meaning. And what had I been doing for all those thirty years of conscious life? Far from working for an existence for everyone, I had not even done so for myself. I had lived as a parasite and when I asked myself why I lived, I received the answer: for nothing. If the meaning of human existence lies in working to procure it I had spent thirty years attempting, not to procure it, but to destroy it for myself and for others. How then could I get any answer other than that my life is evil and meaningless? Indeed it was evil and meaningless.

The life of the world runs according to someone's will; our lives and the lives of everything in existence are in someone else's hands. In order to have any chance of comprehending this will we must first fulfil it by doing what is asked of us. If I do not do what is asked of me I will never understand what it is that is asked of me, and still less what is asked of us all, of the whole world.

If a naked, hungry beggar were taken at a crossroads and led to an enclosed part of a splendid establishment where he is given food and drink, and then forced to move some kind of handle up and down, it is obvious that before deciding why it was he had been brought there to move the handle, and whether or not the establishment was reasonably arranged, the beggar must first move the handle. If he moves the handle he will see that it operates a pump, that the pump draws water and the water flows into the garden. Then he will be taken away from the enclosed place and given another job, and he will gather fruits and will enter into the joy of his lord. As he progresses from lower to higher tasks he will continue to understand more and more about the structure of the establishment and participate in it, and he will never stop to ask why he is there, and he will never come to reproach his master.

Likewise the simple uneducated working people, whom we refer to as the herd, fulfil the will of their master without ever reproaching him. But we, the wise, eat the master's food without doing what he asks of us; instead of doing it we sit around in circles debating whether we should do something as stupid as moving a handle up and down. And then we think it over and decide that either the master is stupid, or that he does not exist and that we are the only intelligent ones. The only thing is, we feel that we are no good for anything and that we must somehow escape from ourselves.

CHAPTER 12

Having realized the errors in rational knowledge I found it easier to free myself from the temptation of futile theorizing. The conviction that knowledge of the truth can only be found in life stirred me to doubt the worth of my own way of life. The thing that saved me was that I managed to tear myself away from my exclusive existence and see the true life of the simple working people, and realize that this alone is genuine life. I realized that if I wanted to understand life and its meaning I had to live a genuine life and not that of a parasite; and having accepted the meaning that is given to life by that real section of humanity who have become part of that genuine life, I had to try it out.

p. 64

Yet time and again, from different approaches, I kept coming to the same conclusion, that I could not have come into the world without any cause, reason, or meaning; that I could not be the fledgeling fallen from the nest that I felt myself to be. If I lie on my back crying in the tall grass, like a fledgeling, it is because I know that my mother brought me into the world, kept me warm, fed me and loved me. But where is she, that mother? If I am abandoned, then who has abandoned me? I cannot hide myself from the fact that someone who loved me gave birth to me. Who is this someone? Again, God.

'He knows and He sees my search, my struggle and my grief. He does exist,' I told myself. And I had only to recognize this for an instant and life would rise up within me and I would feel the possibility and joy of living. But again, from the recognition of the existence of God, I moved on to search for my relationship to Him, and again I was presented with that God, our Creator, in three persons, who sent us His son, our Saviour. And again, that God, separated from me and the world, would melt like ice before my eyes, and once more there was nothing left and my flicker of life was extinguished. I fell into despair and felt that there was nothing else I could do except kill myself. And worst of all was that I did not even feel I could do that.

Not two or three, but tens of hundreds of times, my mood suddenly changed from joy and animation to despair and a consciousness of the impossibility of living.

But then I stopped and looked at myself and at what was going on inside me. I recalled the hundreds of occasions when life had died within me only to be reborn. I remembered that I only lived during those times when I believed in God. Then, as now, I said to myself: I have only to believe in God in order to live. I have only to disbelieve in Him, or to forget Him, in order to die. What are these deaths and rebirths? It is clear that I do not live when I lose belief in God's existence, and I should have killed myself long ago, were it not for a dim hope of finding Him. I live truly only when I am conscious of Him and seek Him. What then is it you are seeking? a voice exclaimed inside me. There He is! He, without whom it is impossible to live. To know God and to live are one and the same thing. God is life.

'Live in search of God and there will be no life without God!' And more powerfully than ever before everything within and around me came to light, and the light has not deserted me since.

And I was saved from suicide. When and how this change occurred in me I could not say. Just as the life force within me was extinguished gradually and imperceptibly, and I came upon the impossibility of life, the cessation of life and the need for suicide, so too did this life force return to me, gradually and imperceptibly. And, strangely, the life force that returned to me was not a new one but the same old one that had attracted me during the early period of my life. I returned to all those things that had been part of my childhood and youth. I returned to a belief in that will that had given birth to me and which asked something of me. I returned to the idea that the single most important aim of my life is to improve myself, that is, to live according to this will. I returned to the conviction that I could find the manifestation of this will in something that had been hidden from me for a long time, in what humanity had worked out long ago for its own guidance. In other words I returned to a belief in God, in moral perfection, and to that tradition which had given life a meaning. Only the difference now was that whereas before I had

accepted all this unconsciously, I now knew that I could not live without it.

At the time it was so essential for me to believe in order to live that I subconsciously hid from myself the contradictions and obscurities in the religious dogma. But there was a limit to the amount of meaning that could be read into the rituals. If the most important words of the Ectene¹⁴ became increasingly clear to me, and even if I somehow managed to interpret the words: 'And remembering Our Sovereign Lady, Holy Mother of God, and all the saints, ourselves and one another, let us all devote our entire life to Christ, Our Lord'; and even if I interpreted the frequent repetition of prayers for the Tsar and his family by the fact that they are more exposed to temptation than others, and therefore in greater need of prayer, and the prayers for the subjugation of our enemies and adversaries by saying that they are evil, nevertheless these prayers and others, such as the Hymn of the Cherubim, the Chosen Warriors, as well as the whole sacrament of the Eucharist, in fact nearly two thirds of the service, if not all of it, had no meaning or made me feel that in giving it meaning I was lying and thereby destroying my relation to God and losing all possibility of faith.

I experienced the same thing over the celebration of the major feasts. I could understand the law of observing the Sabbath, in other words devoting one day to God. But the most important feast was in memory of the Resurrection, the reality of which I could neither imagine nor understand. And the name 'Resurrection' was also given to the weekly feast day.¹⁵ On this day the sacrament of the Eucharist was performed, which I found quite incomprehensible. All the other twelve feast days, except for Christmas, were in memory of miracles – things which I endeavoured not to think about, in order not to deny them: the Ascension, Pentecost, the Epiphany, the Intercession of the Virgin, and so on. At the celebration of these festivals, feeling that an importance had been ascribed to things I considered to be of little importance, I either invented something that would suffice as an explanation, or closed my eyes so that I would not see the things that tempted me.

This happened to me more powerfully than ever when I participated in what are the most usual, and regarded as the most important, sacraments: Baptism and Communion. Here I did not come into conflict with something incomprehensible but with fully comprehensible acts; it seemed to

me that these acts were seductive and I found myself in a dilemma – either I rejected them, or I lied about them.

I shall never forget the tormenting feeling that I experienced on the day I received communion for the first time in many years. The service, the priest, the rules of prayer,¹⁶ were all something I could understand, and created in me a joyful realization that the meaning of life was being revealed. The communion itself I interpreted as an act performed in memory of Christ, signifying the purification of sin and the full acceptance of Christ's teachings. If this explanation was artificial I failed to notice its falsity. As I bowed down and humbled myself before the confessor, a simple, timid priest, I felt so happy to be shaking loose all the dirt in my soul, repenting all my sins, so happy to be united in thought with the aspirations of the Fathers who had written the prayers of the office, so happy to be united with all those who have and who do believe, that I failed to notice the artificiality of my interpretations. But when I approached the Royal Doors and the priest asked me to repeat what I believe, and that what I was about to receive was actually the body and blood, my heart contracted; it was more than a false note, it was a cruel demand made by someone who evidently had never known what faith is.

I can now permit myself to say that it was a cruel demand, but at the time I did not think so; it was just horribly painful to me. I was no longer in the position I had been in during my youth, when I thought that everything in life was lucid. I had come to faith because apart from it I had found nothing, absolutely nothing, other than destruction; it was therefore impossible to give up the faith, and so I submitted. I discovered in my soul a feeling that helped me to endure it. It was a sense of self-abasement and humility. I humbled myself and swallowed the body and blood without feeling any sense of blasphemy, and with the desire to believe; but the blow had already struck. Knowing in advance what awaited me I could not do it a second time.

I nevertheless continued to perform the church rituals, and I still believed that the truth lay in the dogma I was following. Then something happened to me which is clear to me now, but which struck me as strange at the time.

I was listening to the conversation of an illiterate peasant, a pilgrim, speaking about God, religion, life and salvation when a knowledge of faith was opened up to me. I drew closer to the people and, as I listened to their debates on life and religion, I found myself coming closer and closer to an understanding of the truth. The same thing happened to me when I read the Lives of the Martyrs and the Prologues,¹⁷ which became my favourite

reading. Disregarding the miracles and thinking of them as fables expressing ideas, this reading revealed to me the meaning of life. There were the lives of Macarius the Great,¹⁸ Joseph the Prince (the story of Buddha), the writings of John Chrysostom,¹⁹ the story of the traveller in the well, of the monk who found gold, of Peter the Publican and the histories of the martyrs, all of whom proclaimed that death does not obliterate life; and there were the tales of illiterate and stupid men who found salvation, although they knew nothing about the teachings of the Church.

But I had only to mix in the company of learned believers, or to borrow their books, and vague feelings of doubt, dissatisfaction and exasperation with their arguments would rise up within me, and I felt that the further I penetrated their discourses, the further I distanced myself from the truth and headed for despair.

CHAPTER 15

p 73

I so often envied the peasants their illiteracy and lack of learning. They found nothing false in those doctrinal statements which seemed apparent rubbish to me. They could accept them and believe in the truth, in the same truth that I believed in. Only for me, wretched fellow, it was obvious that the truth was interwoven with fine threads of falsehood, and that I could not accept it as such.

Thus I lived for about three years and in the early days when, like one possessed, I was gradually acquiring the truth, scenting out the direction that seemed the clearest, these details struck me less. When I failed to understand something I told myself: 'I am guilty, I am a fool.' But the more I became infused with the truths I was studying, the more they became the basis of my life, the more burdensome and irritating these obstacles became, and the sharper the division between what I did not understand and what I could never understand except by lying to myself.

Despite the doubts and sufferings I still clung to the Orthodox Church. But questions of life that had to be resolved kept rising to the surface, and the Church's ruling on these issues – contrary to the very foundations of faith by which I lived – finally obliged me to renounce the possibility of communion with Orthodoxy. First and foremost these issues concerned the attitude of the Orthodox Church to other Churches, to the Catholics and the so-called Raskolniks.²⁰ At the time, as a result of my interest in religion, I had come into contact with believers of various denominations: Catholics, Protestants, Old Believers,²¹ Molokans,²² and others. Among them I met many deeply moral men with sincere belief. I wished to be a brother to these people. And what happened? The teaching which had promised me unity of all through one faith and through love, that very teaching, speaking through its highest representatives, told me that all these people were living a lie, that the thing which gave them strength of life was a temptation of the devil, and that it is we alone who are in possession of the only possible truth. And I saw that the Orthodox Church regarded as heretics all those who did not profess an identical faith to theirs, just as the Catholics and the others consider the Orthodox followers to be heretics. And I saw that the Orthodox, although they may try to hide it, regard with hostility all those who do not practise their faith by using the same external symbols and words as themselves. And this could

not be otherwise, first of all because the assertion that you live in falsehood and I in truth is the most cruel thing that one man can say to another and secondly, because a man who loves his children and his brothers cannot help feeling hostile towards those who want to convert his children and his brothers to a false belief. And this hostility increases in proportion to one's knowledge of theology. And assuming that truth lies in union by love, I was struck by the fact that theology was destroying the thing it should be advancing.

The temptation is obvious to educated men like ourselves who live in countries where a variety of different faiths are practised and who have seen the contemptuous, self-righteous, invincible manner of rejection with which the Catholics behave towards the Orthodox and the Protestants, and the Orthodox towards the Catholics and Protestants, and the Protestants towards them both. And there is such a similar attitude between the Old Believers, Russian Evangelists, Shakers²³ and all the other religions, that the very obviousness of the temptation initially perplexed me. I told myself: no, it cannot be so simple. Surely if men fail to see that if their two convictions contradict each other, then neither of them possesses the sole truth that constitutes faith. There is something else here, there must be an explanation. I felt sure there was and I searched for the explanation, reading everything I could on the subject and consulting everyone I could. But I received no explanation other than the one according to which the Sumsky Hussars consider themselves to be the finest regiment in the world, while the Yellow Uhlans consider that they are the best regiment in the world. The ecclesiastics of all the different religious denominations, through their finest representatives, could tell me nothing except that they believed themselves to be in possession of the truth whilst others had strayed from it and that all they could do was to pray for them. I visited archimandrites, bishops, elder monks and monks of the strictest orders, yet none of them made any attempt to elucidate the matter for me. Only one explained it to me, but in such a way that I never asked anyone again.

I have already said that for every non-believer who returns to the faith (and this could include all of our younger generation), the question that first presents itself is: why is the truth not to be found in Lutheranism, or Catholicism, but only in the Orthodox faith? Someone who has been educated at secondary school cannot help knowing what the peasant does not know – namely, that the Protestants and Catholics are equally convinced of the singular truth of their faiths. Historical evidence, twisted by each religion to suit its own purpose, is insufficient. Is it not possible, as

I have suggested, to understand the teachings in a superior way, so that from an elevated level the differences might disappear, as they do for people who genuinely believe? Is it not possible to go further along that path which we are following with the Old Believers? They stress the fact that their cross, their allelujahs, and their way of processing around the altar differ from ours. We say: you believe in the Nicene Creed and in the seven sacraments, and so do we. Let us keep to that and for the rest you may do as you please. Thus we have united with them by placing the essential aspects of faith above the non-essential. Is it not possible to say to the Catholics: you believe in such and such and so and so, which are the important things, as for the issue of the filioque²⁴ and the Pope, you may do as you please. And can we not say the same to the Protestants and unite with them in the more important issues? My interlocutor agreed with my ideas, but told me that such concessions would provoke criticism from the spiritual authorities in that it suggests a departure from the faith of our ancestors and would lead to a schism, and that the vocation of the clergy is to safeguard, in all its purity, the Greek Orthodox faith that has been handed down by our forefathers.

Then I understood it all. While I am seeking faith, the force of life, they are seeking the best way of fulfilling, in the eyes of men, certain human obligations. And in fulfilling these human affairs they perform them in a human fashion. However much they might speak about their compassion for their lost brethren, or of their prayers for those who stand before the throne of the Almighty, it has always been necessary to use force in carrying out human duties. Just as it has always been applied, so it is now, and always will be. If two religions each consider that they hold the truth and the other a lie, then in order to convert their brothers to the truth they will each preach their own doctrines. And if a false doctrine is taught to the inexperienced sons of the Church which holds the truth, then that Church will have no choice other than to burn the books and banish the person who is leading his sons into temptation. What can be done with a sectarian who, in the eyes of the Orthodox Church, is ablaze with the fire of false doctrine, and who is misleading the sons of the Church in the most important matter of life, in faith? What can be done with him other than chop off his head or imprison him? Under the Tsar, Alexis Mikhailovitch,²⁵ they were burned at the stake; in other words, the severest method of punishment of the time was enforced. In our day too the severest method of punishment is enforced: imprisonment in solitary confinement. As I turned my attention to what is done in the name of religion

I was horrified and very nearly repudiated Orthodoxy. A further thing was the Church's attitude to life with regard to war and executions.

At the time Russia was at war.²⁶ And, in the name of Christian love, Russians were killing their fellow men. It was impossible not to think about this. It was impossible to avoid the fact that killing is evil and contrary to the most basic principles of any faith. And yet prayers were said in the churches for the success of our armies, and our religious teachers acknowledged this killing as an outcome of faith. And this was not only applied to murder in time of war, but, during the troubled times that followed the war, I witnessed members of the Church, her teachers, monks, and ascetics condoning the killing of helpless, lost youths. As I turned my attention to all that is done by people who profess Christianity, I was horrified.

*

I wrote the above three years ago.

The other day, while I was re-reading this printed section and returning to the train of thoughts and feelings that were inside me when I was experiencing all this, I had a dream. This dream expressed for me, in condensed form, all that I had lived through and described, therefore I think that for those who have understood me a description of the dream will refresh, clarify and unify all that has been related at such length in these pages. Here is the dream: I see that I am lying on a bed. I am neither comfortable, nor uncomfortable. I am lying on my back. But I start to think about whether or not I am comfortable and it seems to me that my legs are a bit awkward; I do not know whether it is that they are too short or that they are uneven. I shift my legs and at the same time I begin to think about the way I am lying and what I am lying on, things which had not entered my head until now. And looking at my bed I see that I am lying on some plaited rope supports that are attached to the sides of the bed. My feet are resting on one of the supports, my calves on another and my legs are uncomfortable. I somehow know that these supports can be moved. Moving one of my legs I push away the furthest support beneath my feet. I presume that this will be better. But I have pushed it too far and want to rescue it with my legs, and this movement causes yet another support, beneath my calves, to fall off and my calves are left dangling. I move my whole body in order to adjust my position and am quite certain that this will settle the matter. But with this movement still more of the supports slip and move away beneath me and I can see that things are getting worse: the whole lower part of my body is slipping and hanging down, and my feet do not reach the ground. I am only supported on the upper half of my back and I start to feel not just uncomfortable but

terrified of something. Only at this point do I ask myself the thing that has not yet entered my head. I ask myself: where am I and what am I lying on? I begin looking around and before anywhere else I look beneath me, where my body is dangling and in the direction where I feel I am bound to fall very soon. I look below, and I cannot believe my eyes. I am at a height not just of, say, an extremely tall tower or mountain, but I am at a height such as I could never have imagined.

I cannot even discern whether I can see anything there below, in the bottomless abyss over which I am hanging and into which I am being drawn. My heart contracts and I feel terrified. It is dreadful to look down there. I feel that if I look down I will immediately slip from the last support and perish. I do not look, but not looking is still worse because I am thinking about what is going to happen to me when I slip from the last support. And I feel that I am losing my last bit of strength through terror, and that my back is slowly slipping lower and lower. Another moment and I will fall off. And then I have a thought: perhaps it is not real. It is a dream. I will wake up. I try to wake up and cannot. 'What can I do, what can I do?' I ask myself, looking upwards. Above there is also an abyss. I look into this abyss of sky and try to forget about the abyss below, and I do in fact forget it. The infinity below repels and frightens me; the infinity above attracts and reassures me. Thus I am hanging over the abyss, held up by the last of the supports that has not yet slipped out from under me; I know that I am dangling but I only look upwards and my fear passes away. As happens in a dream, a voice says: 'Take note of this, this is it!' I look further and further into the infinity above me and feel myself growing calmer. I remember everything that has happened and how it happened: how I shifted the position of my legs, how I was dangling there, how terrified I felt, and how I was saved from my terror by looking upwards. And I asked myself: 'Am I not still dangling there?' And I do not look around so much as feel with my whole body the edge of the support by which I am held up. I see that I am no longer dangling or falling but am firmly supported. I ask myself how I am being supported: I grope about, look around and see that beneath me, under the middle of my body, there is a single support and when I look up I am lying on it in a position of secure balance, and that it alone gave me support before. And then, as happens in dreams, the mechanism by which I am supported seems to me to be a very natural, comprehensible and sure thing, although when awake it makes no sense at all. I am even surprised, in my sleep, that I had not understood this before. It appears that there is a pillar at my head and the solidity of this slender pillar is beyond doubt, although there is nothing for it to stand on. A rope is

hanging very ingeniously, yet simply, from the pillar, and if one lies with the middle of one's body on the rope and looks up there can be no question of falling. This was all clear to me and I was glad and tranquil. It was as if someone were saying to me: 'See that you remember.' And I woke up.